Britain’s Bomb: What Next?, ed. Brian Wicker

Britain's Bomb: What Next? ed. Brian Wicker (SCM 2006), xii+211pp., £12.99 pbk

This collection includes essays by a range of political, military, scientific and church figures, several with links to the Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament. It addresses possible future options for the United Kingdom's nuclear deterrence infrastructure following the decommissioning of Trident, scheduled for 2024 at the end of a projected 30-year lifespan.

The present strategic system consists of four nuclear submarines based at Faslane on the Clyde with one on patrol at any time. It includes about 180 warheads, complemented by around 110 US aircraft-based tactical ballistic weapons stored in underground vaults at RAF Lakenheath. Britain holds a tiny proportion of the world's 27,000 or so warheads, most of which are American and Russian. Trident costs about £700m per year to run, and £12.5 billion was spent creating the system at 1998 prices.

South Africa has dismantled its weapons and Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus chose not to retain any following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Should Britain go down a similar route? The book's contributors differ. A systematic theological repudiation of the nuclear option is strikingly absent, although several pieces repeat standard disarmament arguments. On the one hand, we do not know what future world alliances might develop, such as a new Eastern axis based around Pakistan and a nuclear Iran. Yet two contributors, Michael MccGwire and Tom Sauer, suggest that Britain's national interest and place on the world stage could best be promoted by unilaterally disarming and becoming a 'soft power'.

Some of the disadvantages of retaining a nuclear option need to be made clear. Dependence on the United States for ongoing maintenance and technical support is a major reason why foreign policies are so closely intertwined. Moreover, the American software used might conceivably have been programmed to restrict the range of possible targets or require presidential approval prior to use. Smaller warheads are a future option, but the spectre of tactical weapons replacing strategic ones is worrying, because they are military weaponry at hand to be used rather than political options whose deployment would not form as such part of any military campaign.

The most informative part of the book is the 20-page technical annex based on work by John Ainslie. The wealth of detail it provides suggests ways in which Britain could continue its pursuit of minimum deterrence and eventually disarm: reduction in operational readiness from the current several days; continued downsizing of total explosive power held, already half its peak Cold War level; fewer missiles on submarines; no advance programming of targets. It seems that the current Trident system could in reality remain in service well beyond 2024, perhaps until about 2040. A huge procurement project does not need to be approved in a hurry, despite what government might say.

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